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MARRIAGE AND DESCENT IN EAST ARNHEM LAND

By A. P. ELKIN

611 MR. THEODOR WEBB'S article on "Social Organization in East Arnhem Land"[1] supplies evidence for the existence of a 114 rule of descent which is very interesting and at the same time unusual in Australia. He states that "the moieties are determined by patrilineal descent, but the subsections by matrilineal descent." Perhaps it would be better to say that the descent of the moieties is patrilineal, while the descent of the subsections, which are divided between the moieties, four in each, is indirect patrilineal; but there is a proviso that in the case of alternate marriage, of which there is a regular scheme, the children belong to the subsection of the father's moiety to which they would have belonged had their *actual mother* been regularly married according to the strict subsection rule. Thus, the father is "thrown away" as far as the subsection is concerned.

617 582 611 Now, the subsection from which the alternate wife comes, belongs to the same section as the subsection of the regular wife. This may be put graphically as follows (the usual *Oceania* symbols are used):

$$\begin{array}{ccc} A^1 & = & B^1 \\ A^2 & = & B^2 \\ C^1 & = & D^1 \\ C^2 & = & D^2 \end{array}$$

A man of subsection A^1 normally marries a woman of subsection B^1, and his children belong to subsection D^2. But he may marry a woman of the other subsection of section B, that is B^2; if he does so, his children belong to D^1 and not to D^2. This is what follows if a woman of B^2 were married to a man of A^2, her regular spouse, and bore him children. If, on the other hand, a man of A^2 married a woman of B^1, his alternate wife, the children are no longer D^1, but D^2. Such is the scheme of descent for all the marriages, regular and

[1] *Oceania*, III, 406-411.

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alternate, between the subsections. As far as the sections are concerned—ignoring the two subsections into which each section has been divided—the normal rules of marriage and descent are followed, namely, $\begin{pmatrix} A = B \\ C = D \end{pmatrix}$, and this was the conclusion of W. Lloyd Warner, who worked in the same region as Mr. Webb.[2]

But Mr. Webb's article reveals a most interesting feature of the subsection system in East Arnhem Land, namely, that the cycle of a man of any one subsection is not completed until by marriage and descent all eight subsections have been gone through, and until by descent alone all four subsections of his own moiety have been gone through. In the typical Australian subsection system, however, the cycle is completed by going through four of the subsections in marriage and descent, and two of the man's own moiety in descent only. To put it in another way, in the East Arnhem Land system as described by Mr. Webb, a man and his son's son do not belong to the one subsection, as is the case in the typical systems; the first descendant that belongs to the man's own subsection is his son's son's son's son. Or to use the usual symbols, in the typical system a man of A^1 marries a woman of B^1 and has children D^2; his son, D^2, marries a woman of C^2 and his children are back in A^1. But according to the table provided by Mr. Webb the cycle is: a man of A^1 marries a woman of B^1 and has a son D^2; the latter marries a woman of C^2 and has a son A^2 (not A^1 as in the usual systems); he then marries a woman of B^2 and has a son D^1, who marries a woman of C^1 and his children belong to A^1. According to this rule a man and his son's son cannot marry women of the same subsection, except in the case of an alternate marriage, for they belong to the two different subsections of one section. But in the case of an alternate marriage A^1 marries a woman of B^1, and his son D^2 marries a woman of C^1 instead of C^2, and so his children belong to A^1, the subsection of their father's father.

[2] "Morphology and Functions of the Australian Murngin Type of Kinship," *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 33, 2, 184.

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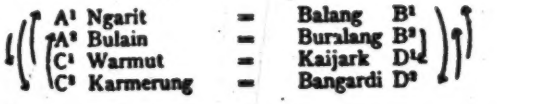
Using the East Arnhem Land subsection terms as well as the usual symbols, the system may be tabulated as follows:



The sign = connects intermarrying pairs of subsections, and the arrows the subsections of mother and child. It should further be remembered that the subsections Ngarit, Bulain, Kaijark and Bangardi together form the Yiritja patrilineal moiety, while the Balang, Buralang, Warmut and Karmerung belong to the Dua moiety. The above table depicts the regular scheme of marriage and descent according to Mr. Webb; an alternate marriage could result in shortening the cycle, as already explained.

In the descent of the subsections Webb differs from Warner, who gives the normal rule of marriage and descent in East Arnhem Land to be the typical Australian rule; that is, in the case of regular marriages a man and his son's son belong to the one subsection, while in alternate marriage descent depends on the mother alone. Indeed, Warner goes further and says that the descent of the subsections always depends on the mother, is matrilineal, and never bi-lineal. He further states that a man of either of the two subsections (say A^1 and A^2), which together make up one section (A), may marry into either of the subsections (B^1 and B^2), which together make up the other member of the intermarrying pair of sections (such as A and B).[3] Webb, however, says that the rule is for A^1 to marry B^1, though under certain circumstances he might marry B^2. Now this would appear to be the case, for as Warner points out,[4] the marriage rule is with mother's brother's daughter, and normally speaking the mother's brother's daughter of A^1 belongs to B^1, that is, to A^1's regular intermarrying subsection, according to Webb's table of marriage and descent. But according to Warner's formula,[5] which expresses the typical Australian subsection system, such as we find

[3] W. Lloyd Warner, *op. cit.*, 184-185.
[4] *Op. cit.*, 188.
[5] *Op. cit.*, 184.

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amongst the Northern Aranda and others, a man of East Arnhem Land could only marry his correct spouse, that is, his mother's brother's daughter, if he married into the alternate subsection (B^2), unless his mother's brother (C^2) had married his "alternate spouse" (D^1 instead of D^2). It should be remembered that one function performed by the normal and usual subsection system is to put cross-cousins into a different subsection from certain second-cousins (the children of mother's cross-cousins, *etc.*), and to put the latter, and not the former, into the subsection with which a person's own subsection regularly intermarries. Thus, in the usual Australian systems, the cross-cousins of A^1 are classed in subsection B^2, with which subsection A^1 does not intermarry. In other words, the subsection system is normally associated with the prohibition of cross-cousin marriage and with the rule of marriage with the daughter of parents' cross-cousin, own or tribal. But the whole point about the East Arnhem Land system is an association of subsections with a rule of marriage with the mother's brother's daughter. That obviously means that under a normal observance of the kinship marriage rule the rule of the descent of the subsections cannot be the same as in those tribes in which subsections are really part of the machinery for preventing cross-cousin marriage. Now, Mr. Webb's table of the marriage and descent of the subsections just shows how this association of subsections and matrilineal cross-cousin marriage can be worked. It is done normally by a cycle which, as we have seen, runs through the whole eight subsections, and not only four of them.

Mr. Webb's account of the descent of the subsections must, of course, be carefully checked, but there does not seem to be any reason for doubting its accuracy. It seems to be based on first-hand information from the natives whom he knows well, and apparently it has not been affected by any attempt to make it fit any theoretical formula of the working of subsection systems. Moreover, the fact that Mr. Webb does not even mention the kinship marriage rule probably strengthens the value of his evidence for the bare working of the subsection system in his region. In other words, Mr. Webb's account does not seem to have been in any way the result of theoretical considerations. Mr. Warner, on the other hand,

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617 582 611 114 seems to be passing over the larger cycle of the marriage and descent of the subsections, and merely treating the system as one of four sections; indeed, he almost ignores the subsections.[6] But the subsection system seems to be quite important in this area; it has totemic significance, it is used in daily conversation almost as much as the kinship terms, and it is of great value in ascertaining relationship and the associated modes of behaviour at inter-tribal gatherings. It is not therefore an unimportant subdivision of the four sections in East Arnhem Land any more than it is, say, in East Kimberley. Indeed, it is so important that it has been most carefully arranged to fit in with a rule of marriage with the mother's brother's daughter. Theoretically, this has been regarded as impossible, as, of course, it is, if the typical rule of the marriage and descent of the subsections be adhered to. The aborigines of this area were not so bound by theory, and faced with a practical problem, they seem to have solved it in a most ingenious manner by doubling the normal length of the cycle. The anthropologist finds in this another reason for not underestimating the intelligence of the Australian aborigine.

A. P. ELKIN

A NOTE UPON A SIMILAR SYSTEM AMONG THE NANGIOMERI

By W. E. H. STANNER

060 DURING the course of my field work in the Daly River–Fitzmaurice River district of North Australia in 1932 I spent two or three weeks among the Nangiomeri tribe, whose true historic location is about 60 to 100 miles south-west of the white settlement on the Daly River, where the few remaining members of this tribe now live. The Nangiomeri possess a kinship system of a type closely related to that reported by Mr. Webb and upon which Dr. Elkin's interpretative article is based. I imagined at the time of my discovery and recording of the Nangiomeri system that it might be purely a localized phenomenon, but its occurrence in Arnhem Land, many hundreds of miles away, makes this variant full of important implications for the general theory of Australian kinship. This note is therefore appended to Dr. Elkin's article.

The Nangiomeri have been until recently a tribe without sections, subsections, moieties, or any named or unnamed divisions whatever. They probably once possessed a form of patrilineal totemism. Their kinship system was of general Kariera

[6] *Op. cit.* On a chart facing page 187, Warner simply uses the symbols $A^{1\,2}$, $B^{1\,2}$, $C^{1\,2}$, and $D^{1\,2}$, so that the subsection signs are valueless.

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type, with bilateral cross-cousin marriage. Within recent years (it is impossible to say *when*) they have acquired from tribes to the south and south-west a very complex kinship system of subsections, with matrilineal subsectional totemism, and a new form of marriage—with the sister's son's daughter (provided this is not the child of one's own daughter, who may be one wife of the sister's son). The essential feature of the descent of the subsections is that the father's father of a man A, and the son's son of a man A, are in the same subsection, *not* as in most other Australian systems, the father's father of A and A himself. Among the Nangiomeri A falls into an intermediate subsection, and the son's son of A completes the full cycle of descent by being in the subsection which originally held the father's father of A.

The system has complexities which will be dealt with in detail in a later paper. It has obviously not been perfectly assimilated by the Nangiomeri. These people quite frankly admit they do not yet understand it. Much of the system as they possess it appears to be functionless, its only real use (since the local organization has completely broken up, and the tribal life disintegrated) being that it makes their occasional visits to and contacts with Fitzmaurice and Victoria River tribes very much more satisfactory. Other Daly River tribes are very sensitive about their inability to understand the Nangiomeri system, and the Nangiomeri admit to having felt much the same years ago before they were *taught* the new way by the Fitzmaurice and Victoria River tribes.

It is interesting to learn from Dr. Elkin that some of the subsection terms are very similar or identical with terms he recorded in the Hall's Creek district in Western Australia. The system as a whole has clearly spread to the Nangiomeri from that general direction.

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